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ABSTRACT

The new Writing for Television Program at Morgan State University (suggested by Warner Brothers at a summer seminar) has added new courses each semester: (1) basic 200-level courses in the "Fundamentals of Writing for Television" and "Introductory Script Writing"; (2) more specialized 300-level courses in "Episodic Comedy" and the "One Hour Drama"; and (3) 400-level courses in "Advanced Scriptwriting" and an "Internship in Writing for Television." Essentially each course acts as a logical step in learning the craft of scriptwriting. The first fundamentals course emphasizes the development of dramatic structure, character, dialogue, and script format, thus preparing the beginning writer for more advanced individual and collaborative work. The beginners spend a good bit of time analyzing stories, plays, films, and teleplays to identify the classic dramatic elements from the standpoint of the writer. The fun begins when they rewrite key scenes from television shows. Moving like the wind, the second course concentrates on writing the logline (one sentence summary of the show), orally pitching the story, working out the show's basic structure, outlining the dramatic story, and actually writing the script. Courses at the 300-level concentrate on comic theory, evaluation (of sitcoms and other television shows), and writing. The 400-level course studies film scripts, adaptations of literary works, docudramas, and television movies. (TB)

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Valerie F. Sedlak

CEA TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE APRIL, 1994

WRITING FOR TELEVISION

ACADEMIC POTENTIAL REALIZED: FROM COURSE TO PROGRAM TO MAJOR

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WRITING FOR TELEVISION
ACADEMIC POTENTIAL REALIZED: FROM COURSE TO PROGRAM TO MAJOR

Seizing the opportunity to develop new courses in writing for television that had been suggested by Warner Brothers at the Professors' Seminars in August, 1990, I was particularly intrigued by their suggestion that we teach scriptwriting by looking to Aristotle for dramatic structure, Chaucer for character development, and Shakespeare for multiple plotting models. There seemed to be a solid academic basis built in here, and thus armed, I presented the challenge to expand our curricular offerings to the Dean of Arts and Sciences in September of that year. There were a number of raised eyebrows at the university at that time because we were not to receive a large grant or start up monies of any type to begin the effort. But the Dean's encouragement and enthusiasm led a department with no upper-division writing courses other than one advanced composition and two journalism courses to develop a Writing for Television Program at Morgan State. We were to begin with one course.

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That course, obviously, had to be a course in the fundamentals, and the fact that it was ready by January 1991 was in itself a <u>minor</u> miracle. The <u>major</u> miracle was that forty students enrolled in this course, which was not advertised either on or off campus. This told us that our students were ready for curricular diversity and gave us the confidence to

move forward to design a six-course sequence. This new Writing for Television Program added a new course each semester, courses which range from the two basic 200 level courses in the Fundamentals of Writing for Television and Introductory Scriptwriting to more specialized 300 level courses in Episodic Comedy and the One Hour Drama and finally two 400 level courses in Advanced Scriptwriting and an Internship in Writing for Television.

Essentially, each course acts as a logical step in learning the craft of scriptwriting. The first Fundamentals course emphasizes the development of dramatic structure, character, dialogue, and script format, thus preparing the beginning writer for more advanced individual and collaborative work. The beginners spend a good bit of time analyzing stories, plays, films, and teleplays to identify the classic elements of dramatic storytelling <u>from the point of view of the writer</u>. They then learn to use in their own work the structures they discover in the work of others, while also starting to outline plots and collaborating with others to create and revise story outlines and scripts. The fun begins when they rewrite key scenes in a <u>Star Trek</u>, an <u>I'll Fly Away</u>, or an <u>L.A. Law</u> script and then need to show how the rest of the episode must also change. Perhaps the most important element of the Fundamentals course, however, is the development of a thick skin or the ability to take criticism of their work, for only then will they be able to work as part of a writing team.

The second course for the beginner is somewhat deceptive

in its title: Introductory Scriptwriting. Perhaps because we can assume the fundamentals on the part of the student, and perhaps because the spring semester at Morgan is a 17-week affair, we move with the wind in this course. Building upon the initial work in the first semester, this course concentrates on writing the logline (that one-sentence summary of the story for a given episode of a show), the oral pitching of a story idea, working out a basic structure paradigm, outlining the dramatic story, and individual and collaborative scriptwriting for both primetime episodic comedy and drama. What amazes the students is that they are able to go from logline to a completed spec script for a sitcom (some of which are good enough to enter in competitions) and still have enough time left in the semester to begin the process for the one hour drama. In the drama segment of the course they are required to work as members of a two person team, just to gain that experience and open themselves to that opportunity, since many professional writers in Burbank and Hollywood are actually pairs or two people who work for one salary. In this mode then, the student teams logline, pitch, paradigm, step outline, story outline, and usually write the first two acts of the four act one hour drama. Whether they decide to complete that script over the summer is left up to them. Some do. Some don't. Some discover the value of having a writing partner. Some vow never again to work that closely with another human being. But we believe that this lesson is best learned early in the process of finding their way into the

profession of scriptwriting.

At the junior level, the students feel enough confidence in their basic skills to become more serious about scriptwriting. Hence at the 300 level, we offer a one semester Practicum in the Episodic Comedy and the next semester a Seminar in the One Hour Drama. By this time, the students are accustomed to our saying that they must watch television. But now they understand that they must do more than that. They must use television as a teacher by watching, taping, and re-watching given shows quite critically, because they cannot write a good, let alone a great, script for a currently airing show unles they truly know the characters, their voices, the stories already used, the type of premise this show is likely to use, and the type of technical structure used most frequently. For example, in one small area alone, they need to time the teasers, to determine if they introduce either the A or B stories, to be sure that they do or do not relate to the main storylines. Seinfeld uses the standup routine at the start to introduce the major theme of the show, the old Cheers show never used the teaser to introduce a story line, Step by Step normally opens hinting at the A story and sometimes the B story as well, and Murphy Brown goes straight into Act One, Scene One without a teaser. The student script-writer, in other words, must at this stage become more focused and willing to spend more time studying current programming with a critical eye.

In the Episodic Comedy course, we divide the time between theory, evaluation, and writing. Beginning with the nature of comedy, comedic types and techniques, visual and verbal jokes, and different types of comic energy, each student must present an analytic evaluation of a currently airing situation comedy. The point, of course, is for all of the students to gain a clearer concept of comedy and how to use the most effective techniques they just discovered in their own scripts. And to produce those scripts, they run through what is by now a normal process from logline to first look draft. Their skin is thicker, and they realize that they don't need to defend a proposed story line. Whether Steve Urkel falls for a look-and-think-alike girl friend is no longer a matter of honor. It is also in this course that table readings and table revisions begin to get the stress that they have in the industry, and the students learn that revision is the name of the game.

The followup course in the One Hour Drama is patterned after the sitcom course, in that it also explores theory, practice, and writing. Here the students find that the one hour drama is alive and well as they survey the 25-30 shows that air each week, study the significant sub-genres (from the Western to the cop, medical, mystery, detective, sci-fi, action-oriented, historically based, experimental, adult soap, and so on), and implement the required four-act technical structure with three act breaks. At the end of this course, each student has had intensive experience with

multiple plotting (the A, B, and C stories), complicating the plots, increasing the tempo of the scenes, and raising the stakes for the protagonist(s). Equally important, each student has a longer form teleplay for his or her portfolio, eventhough many people are not aware that there is more of a need for one-hour writers than for sitcom writers.

Finally, at the 400 level, we established a course in Advanced Scriptwriting, which extends the student's study to include the film script, the adaptation of literary works to the screen, the television movies, the docudrama, or children's educational/dramatic scripts. This is followed by an Internship course which encourages the student to get out of the classroom, the computer lab, or the writing room and into professional experience in commercial, public, cable, or community college stations, as well as film. The students soon realize how important the contacts they make are and how much of the technical side of the business they need to learn. As we begin this process in a department that never sent students out as interns, we have students intern as researchers for national programs on public television (To the Contrary), as writers and programmers for children's shows on commercial stations (Fox 45's Kids' Clubhouse), and as news and feature makers on community college stations, as well as a writing team who parleyed an internship into a contract to write a feature length film script. But the student who probably benefited most from an internship in the summer between junior and senior year was

a young woman who started as an intern and then became a production assistant for Bill Duke in Pittsburgh when he was filming The Cemetery Club. Her work and that experience led her to Burbank the day after commencement in May, 1993, when as the first graduate of our program, she reported for work as a P.A. again with Bill Duke when he was directing Sister Act 2. From there, she went on to another internship, this time with Hangin' with Mr. Cooper on the Warner lot and then followed Whoopi as a Set P.A. for Careena, Careena, a film that wrapped in late November of 93. Currently, she is working as a creative associate with Disney, having signed a one-year contract and a four-year option. The second graduate of our program also did an internship last summer with Hangin' with Mr. Cooper and as a result was hired as a writers' P.A. for that show in September. In all, we can't stress the importance of the internship enough for the young writer who has had no practical experience in the field.

With this program in place within six semesters, the new curriculum now draws both traditional undergraduates as well as older students who already have their degrees and view these offerings as professional courses that can help them learn the craft. The result is an increase in the number of English majors in our department and an interesting cross-fertilization of creative talents as the older and younger students collaborate on scripts in their table work. Indeed, the desire for this new curriculum and the effectiveness of the new program have led

us to work out our first departmental articulation agreement with one of our local community colleges, which now allows their students to come to the university to take the two sophomore level courses that will then count toward their A.A.'s and in turn allowsour students to intern at the community college's cable station.

Encouraged by an enrollment of from 40 to 80 students in the scriptwriting courses each semester, the department has evaluated those courses and now views them as a worthwhile and viable extension of the curriculum. Thus in September, 1994, the university will offer in addition to our traditional literature and language and teacher education concentrations, an English major with a concentration in Writing for Television. And the following September, we should have in place the master's degree in English with a concentration in Writing for Television. Currently, however, what we hope will make the new undergraduate major a solidly based one is the fact that we have retained the core of the traditional literature major, requiring students to take the usual English and American surveys, Literary Criticism, Shakespeare, Advanced Grammar, an African American survey, and a Senior Seminar in Literature, as well as requiring them to select courses from other groupings, such as Language and Composition, Studies in the Novel, and Mythology and Folklore. Knowing our majors, however, I believe that they will use all of their free electives to take more literature, drama, and theatre courses, because they understand the need to round out

beyond requirements and because they see literature and drama as sources and models for their scriptwriting. In all then, the Warner Brothers outreach was the catalyst that brought about the first major curricular diversification in our department in decades, as it moved logically from the offering of one basic course to the development of an 18-credit program to the establishment of a major--the English major with a concentration in Writing for Television.

Clearly each of our universities has responded differently to the Warner suggestions for teaching and preparing new writers for television. We all received the same outlines and training models, but as might be expected, our appoaches in our courses differ from each other. We, for example, do not do story conferencing as Frostburg State does. Instead, after the pitching process, we work on a dramatic structure paradigm for the proposed episode and then move on to the step outline. Before scripting, we also add another step in several of the courses--a full, narrative story outline for a teleplay or a treatment for a screenplay. Not every television show will ask a free lancer or a staff writer to do this narrative outline, but we want our students to know what is expected should they ever be asked to produce one. And for a free lancer, it could be worth $3,000-4,000. In the end, I don't suppose our differences in approach matter as much as the similarities, and at the core of those similarities are the table readings, the table revisions, and the collaborative writing experiences needed by today's and tomorrow's scriptwriters.

Lastly, in what can only be termed an exceptional outreach from a major studio that has invited universities to diversify their current curricular offerings in order to prepare students to write for television, Warner Brothers has not offered monetary support, but rather the type of support that money cannot buy. Periodically, for instance, they have supplied us with scripts and tapes of sitcoms and one-hour dramas, sent their executives and producers to work with our students, and established a university script competition that offers the winners all-expense paid internships in Burbank on the sets and at the writers' tables of currently airing shows, an opportunity that can and has led to entry level jobs for our students in this industry. The success of the new curriculum at Morgan State and the curricular changes and additions at American or Frostburg State will be measured by the achievements of our graduates, both in the local media marketplace and in the Burbank or New York studios. The first graduates are currently in Burbank in entry level positions for what could become an extremely lucrative career, one in which they will one day have the chance to influence and change the quality of the programs the rest of us watch on television.

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